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A SURVEY OF THE CURRENT LITERATURE  
ON THE PARABLES

A DISSERTATION  
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BY  
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We, the undersigned, hereby certify that we have  
read and recommend to the School of Graduate Studies  
for acceptance, a thesis entitled A SURVEY OF THE  
CURRENT LITERATURE ON THE PARABLES, submitted by  
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## INTRODUCTION

Man faces a difficult task in communicating his thoughts and ideas to his fellow man. Words and expressions often convey different shades of meaning. Misunderstanding may arise from lack of attention, from ignorance or from countless other reasons. Further difficulty arises from the fact that there are many unseen barriers to communication. Thus it is that one who has a passionate zeal to communicate a message uses every resource available to overcome any and all barriers.

Jesus had a message of supreme importance for the people of his day. He had a passionate zeal to communicate that message. The parable was the resource that seemed to prove most effective in accomplishing the task. The parable could illustrate truth in such a manner as to give it relevance to the circumstances of life in which men and women found themselves. The parable could be understood equally as well by the ignorant and uneducated as by the intellectual folk. The parable could be used effectively to speak to a definite situation. It could be used as a weapon in conflict. It could be used to answer questions, to meet rebukes, to teach and to illustrate the relationship that existed between God and man. The parable as Jesus used it, overcame many of the barriers that exist in communication.

The people, who listened to Jesus speak to them in parables, did not likely experience too much difficulty in



## II

understanding what he was telling them. The fact that many of them rejected what he had to say does not mean that they misunderstood him. Understanding does not presuppose agreement.

It is evident from the gospel narratives that the misunderstanding of the parables began in the early Church. The same parable sometimes had a different meaning to each of the writers of the synoptic gospels. Not only do the evangelists give different interpretations of the same parable, in some cases, they cast doubt upon Jesus' intention, when speaking in parables. The following quotation from Mark is illustrative:

Mark 4:10f. And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven."

A similar quotation may be taken from Matthew 13:10f.

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables? And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given . . . This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."



### III

Mark and Matthew seem to suggest here that Jesus used the parables to hide the truth from the eyes of the people. This thought tends to confuse one. Further thought throws new light on it for us. Both Mark and Matthew wrote several years after the crucifixion. The religious and political conditions of their day were changed from that in which Jesus lived. They were looking at the ministry of Jesus in retrospect. In retrospect, this was a fact, seeing the people did not see, and hearing they did not hear, nor did they understand. If they had understood they would not have crucified Christ.

This serves to point out to us that the parable, along with the rest of Jesus' utterances took on a new meaning for the early Church. I intend to discuss this subject further, for it seems important that one has no doubt regarding the intended purpose of Jesus' parables.

Although it is obvious that words, by themselves have power, there is little cause to dispute the fact that the "sitz im leben," the situation out of which the parables came, adds greatly to their effectiveness for us. Thus, even though it is humanly impossible for us to receive the message of the parables as those who listened to Jesus received it, we may nevertheless, profit by our efforts to reconstruct as accurately as possible the natural, religious, political, economic and social factors of the environment in which Jesus lived. In some cases we will be able to recapture the details of the specific situation from which particular parables came.



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Some people have said that Jesus was an ascetic.

Others have said that he was a pacifist, still others say that he was an extrovert. Thus, there have been many judgements passed upon Jesus' personality. It is obvious that many of these judgements have been false and misleading. There is no doubt, however, that a man's words as well as his actions serve to acquaint his listeners with his personality. It seems quite possible and very desirable that we should know something of Jesus' personality. The parables can be most helpful in this regard if we study them objectively and as a group rather than individually. In this way we will avert the danger of reasoning from the particular to the general. At the same time we will be aided in our search for the original meaning and significance of the parables.

The message embodied in the parables of Jesus is as relevant for us today as it was for the first century Christians. As one generation passes away and a new generation rises to take its place there is a constant necessity for education. Education, as I conceive it, is far more than the memorization of a body of material. We must nurture in our young people a familiarity with the basic truths upon which our faith is founded, and in addition, we must convey to them principles by which these truths may be applied. I use the word 'principles' advisedly. Christian truths cannot be properly applied through the use of inflexible rules. The parables teach us something of the flexibility that exists in the application of truth. Jesus was not a legalist, he brought to mankind the



message of grace rather than law. At the same time we must remember that Jesus, by his own testimony, came, not to destroy the law but to fulfil it.

It seems obvious that the parables are an ever ready source of inspiration and material for the preacher. It may or may not seem equally obvious that the greater a man's understanding of his subject the more effective he will be as a vehicle for the transmission of the subject. It is with this thought before me that I carry on the task of examining the literature of the parables and the literature about the parables.



## CHAPTER 1

### THE LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARABLES

#### A. Definition.

From childhood the Christian boy and girl is aware of the fact that Jesus taught religious and moral truths through a medium known as parables. It is not likely, however, that very many Christian men and women could provide an adequate definition of a parable. It seems quite possible that the Jewish layman would be able to define the term with a greater degree of accuracy, due to the fact that the parable as we shall discuss in more detail, found its origin in the Hebrew *mashal* and *hidah*.

The Christian layman shares with his more scholarly brother a degree of difficulty in providing a precise definition of this familiar term - parable.

The Century Dictionary is quoted by Walter Russel Bowie as providing this definition:

"A parable is a story that is or may be true and is used generally to teach some moral or religious truth."<sup>1</sup>

A. T. Cadoux suggests that the parable is a work of art, but says that in actual use it is more than a work of art.

"In its most characteristic use the parable is a weapon of controversy, not shaped like a sonnet in undisturbed concentration, but improvised in conflict to meet an unremediated situation."<sup>2</sup>

1. The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VII, (New York) Walter Russel Bowie, The Parables, 166.

2. A. T. Cadoux, The Parables of Jesus (London), 13.



C. H. Dodd offers a definition which challenges one's thinking:

"It is simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."<sup>3</sup>

There are those who will undoubtedly disagree with his last statement as it suggests doubt of application, yet Dodd seems to me to offer a worthwhile point of departure in one's examination of the parable.

Even though one may agree with any one or even all of these definitions the student of the parable is still not satisfied, for the parable seems to have such variation and range of usage as well as application that an adequate definition warrants more detail than any of the definitions quoted provide.

As I pointed out in the introduction, it is often difficult to translate writings from one language to another due to the lack of words in one language to express or convey the thoughts embodied in another language. The translators who brought forth the LXX experienced some difficulty in choosing a word which would replace the Hebrew word 'mashal'. The Greek word chosen was παραβολή. Prior to this the word παραβολή had a more limited meaning than mashal.

In order to appreciate the meaning and significance of our word parable we must become familiar with the connotation

<sup>3</sup>. C. H. Dodd, Parables of the Kingdom, (London, 1935), 16.



and common usage of the Hebrew word which was replaced with the derivative of the English word 'parable'.

B. T. D. Smith provides a reasonable comprehensive statement with regard to the subject under study. He outlines the origin of the difficulty as follows:

"The Greek translators of the Old Testament in the great majority of instances employed παραβολή to represent mashal, although παραβολή corresponds only to the root meaning of the Hebrew word. The fact that in this instance they made no effort to conceal the verbal poverty of Hebrew by drawing freely upon the richer resources of the Greek language had the result of making παραβολή liable to bear any of the various shades of meaning of mashal when used by writers familiar with the Greek Old Testament. Thus the term is applied in Lk. iv. 23 to a current proverb ("Physician, heal thyself"); it is applied in Lk. vii. 17 to an aphorism ("There is nothing from without the man, that going into him can defile him: but those things which proceed out of the man are those that defile the man") it is apparently applied in Lk. xiv. 7f. to counsel on the conduct of ordinary life such as we meet with in the Wisdom books ("When thou art bidden of any man to a marriage feast sit not down in the chief seat . . .": cf. Prov. XXV.6). But in the great majority of instances the term is used of the illustrative stories and similitudes which are so characteristic a feature of Christ's teaching."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>. B.T.D. Smith, The Parables of the Synoptic Gospels, (Cambridge, 1937), 11.



It is to this latter usage of the word parable that the definitions quoted from Dodd, Cadoux and Bowie would apply. The word parable has, in common usage today, this meaning. However, before examining the parable in its common usage it may be helpful to follow the development of the word mashal.

Smith says that the word mashal may be translated, "to be like." It came to have a wide variety of meanings. In its earliest form it referred to a popular saying or proverb. Such sayings were usually quite terse.

The following are cited as examples:

(I Sam. 10:12)

"Is Saul, also among the prophets?"

"Out of the wicked cometh forth wickedness" is quoted in I Sam. xxiv. 13 as a proverb of the ancients. Ezekiel quotes two current sayings, "The days are prolonged and every vision faileth" (xii. 22), and "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (xviii. 2)<sup>5</sup>

The second step in the development finds the proverb being used as a taunt, Ezekiel xvi. 44 provides a ready illustration. "Behold every one that useth proverbs shall use this proverb against thee, saying, As is the mother, so is her daughter." Luke iv. 23 provides a New Testament example. "Doubtless ye will say unto me this parable, Physician, heal thyself."<sup>6</sup>

There is the recognition that all proverbs were first spoken by one wise man. The characteristic literary form of

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5. Ibid., 2.

6. Ibid., 4.



the early Hebrew proverb is the couplet.

"A wise son maketh a glad father:

But a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother."

(Prov. 10:1)

"As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes,  
So is the sluggard to them that send him."

(Prov. 10:26)

Gradually collections of proverbs dealing with the same subject were made and the mashal came to be a small essay. Another Hebrew word used to express the sayings was hidah. This word may be translated by our word riddle. The hidah and the mashal both embodied figurative sayings in which the wit and wisdom of primitive peoples found expression. The hidah denotes speech that is indirect while the mashal contains straightforward expressions. This point should be noted when considering Jesus' purpose in speaking in parables.

Smith points out three examples in Ezekiel where the mashal is an allegory and is depicted in close association with the riddle or hidah. The passage is found in Ezekiel 18:2f., the first line reading:

"Son of man, put forth a riddle, and speak a parable unto the house of Israel; . . . "7

One of the mashal found in Ezekiel is obscure and thus an interpretation follows. The passage implies, however, that the need for interpretation to follow the mashal is the exception rather than the rule.

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7. Ibid., 7.



Another form of the mashal found in the Old Testament is in the form of a fable. Smith cites examples from Judges 9:7f. and II Sam. 12:1f.

Also to be found in the Old Testament are parables, as we commonly think of them today. One of the outstanding examples and one that is most familiar is Nathan's parable of the poor man's lamb found in II Sam. 12:1f.

In the Oracles of Balaam, as recorded in Numbers, the mashal takes the form of apocalyptic utterances.<sup>8</sup>

This brief survey of the various uses to which the Hebrew word 'mashal' found application throws some light upon the interpretation of Jesus' parables. It makes one aware also of the flexibility with which the term was used. We have noted with Smith, the expansion of its reference, as being indicative of a simple proverb until it eventually denotes an apocalyptic prediction, being expanded along the way to include the riddle, fable, allegory and parable (in the common or narrow sense of the word).

At this point it appears more difficult than ever to arrive at a precise definition of parable, however, a Jewish scholar, I. Abrahams, in his book "Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels" draws out for us the main emphasis of the parable as it developed from the mashal. Abrahams' words are of great value to us because they are acceptable from both the Jewish and the Christian standpoint.



"In this analytical passage, the term Marhal is used in a very wide sense, and includes all forms of applied morality. Parable thus becomes part and parcel of the instrument for arriving at truth and for making truth prevail. Truth to the Pharisee and Evangelist alike, is the will of God, and the parable was at its highest when seeking to do that will.... Parables were not merely an entertainment, they were not merely designed to interest the people. They were the method by which the mysteries of providence and the incidence of duty were posted and illustrated."<sup>9</sup>

In this statement Abrahams has captured for us something of the dynamic of the parable. These sayings came, not out of the minds of day dreamers, but rather from the crucial scenes in the drama of life as it was played by those for whom life and death was a reality, not a dream or a fiction story.

9. I. Abrahams, Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels, (Cambridge, 1917), 106.



B. Figurative Speech.

Figurative speech takes many forms, all of which have been found at one time or another under the general classification of parable. The various types of figurative speech shade into one another in many cases, which often makes classification difficult. There is some advantage, however, in understanding the basic classifications.

Simile and metaphor provide the basis in understanding figurative speech. They are the two simplest forms in which figurative speech is found. Simile expresses direct formal comparison. It infers that one thing is like another. Metaphor also implies likeness, but does so by the transfer of designation. Smith offers the following examples by way of explanation: The first is simile, the second metaphor.

'He sprang on them like a lion.'

'The lion sprang on them'<sup>10</sup>

Both metaphor and simile imply likeness on at least one point between the things being compared. There has been a great deal of confusion in some cases in finding the correct point of comparison. If the intended point of comparison is not found, confusion and false interpretation will result. It must also be noted that the use of simile and metaphor may be abused by endeavoring to develop comparison beyond one point.

Simile and metaphor provide the basis for two more extended types of figurative speech, the similitude and the

10. Smith, op. cit., 16.



allegory. Similitude has been defined as an extended simile.

" . . . in similitude a relationship which normally exists in the sphere of the story, is chosen to express a relationship in another sphere, which the writer cannot otherwise make clear. Because there is a particular relationship between a parched land and the rain which it needs and desires that relationship is chosen to demonstrate the longing of the Psalmist for God."<sup>11</sup>

In this regard Smith says:

"We shall speak of a similitude and not a simile when the illustration depicts familiar scenes and relationships and is painted in some detail."<sup>12</sup>

Similitude sets one thing beside another in order that comparison may be made. Allegory, however, substitutes one thing for another.

"Allegory expresses the relation between certain persons and things by substituting a whole range of persons or things from an entirely different sphere of experience."<sup>13</sup>

Smith says that allegory is not strictly speaking extended metaphor or a series of metaphor. He believes it is the use of symbols rather than metaphors which characterize allegory.

11. Sir Edwyn Hoskyns and Noel Davey, The Riddle of the New Testament, (London, 1931), 180.

12. Smith, op. cit. 12.

13. Hoskyns, op. cit. 179.



"A characteristic of allegory, which distinguishes it sharply from similitude and parable, is the fact that it must be interpreted point by point, feature by feature, in order to be properly appreciated. As far as possible everything in the allegory must represent something else: it is a description in code."<sup>14</sup>

"Parable and similitude must be lifelike or fail in their purpose, but it is not essential that allegorical presentation should conform to any laws of probability or possibility. Many of the pictures of the allegorists, wherein eagles can plant vines, beasts be winged, and stars become bulls, seem properly to belong to that dream world in which they are not infrequently stated to have had their origin. Even when the symbols are drawn from the world of everyday events, unnatural features will often obtrude themselves and rob the picture of its surface realism, . . . We notice again a contrast between allegory and parable or similitude: the figures in the latter are always precisely what they profess to be, stones are stones and burdens are burdens. The room which the woman sweeps in the similitude of the Lost Coin is a room in any peasant's cottage in Palestine; the room which the man sweeps in *The Pilgrims Progress* is not a room but "The Heart of a Man that was never sanctified by the sweet Grace of the Gospel," and the dust is not dust but "his original Sin and inward corruptions that have defiled the whole Man."<sup>15</sup>

Other forms of figurative speech may take the form of

14. Smith. op. cit. 21.

15. Ibid, 21.



example stories, which picture examples of character and conduct which should be either followed or avoided. They tend to teach directly rather than by analogy.

Proverbs provide another category in which a general rule is stated in terms of a particular instance of that rule. Smith points out the fact that this is a much used vehicle of communication and cites several examples.

"If the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit," "Wheresoever the carcass is, there will the vultures be gathered together," "Physician heal thyself."<sup>16</sup>

Having dealt with simile, metaphor, similitude, allegory, example story and proverb it now seems expedient to classify the parable in the scheme of things. This, however, is difficult to do, for, as has been pointed out earlier, parable is all of the figurative forms of speech listed and yet in another sense it is none of them.

To elaborate upon this paradoxical statement let us look first of all at Smith's discussion of parable. He sees parable and similitude as being essentially the same yet with certain distinctions. He says that parable, when used as opposed to similitude, denotes illustrations which are in narrative form.

"The similitude is a picture of familiar happenings, the parable depicts something as having once happened; the similitude opens characteristically with the words, "What man of you . . . ?" - the parable with, "A certain man . . ." But we must recognize that parable and similitude are essentially

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16. Ibid., 19.



skin, serve the same ends, and shade off into one another. Parables either narrate a particular instance of a familiar circumstance or happening (e.g. the parable of the Leaven), or they achieve by their credibility what the similitude effects by appealing to the universally acknowledged.<sup>17</sup>

The type of parable to which Smith refers, we might call the 'proper parable' or any other name that would serve to differentiate it as a particular form of figurative speech having certain characteristics which places it in a category similar to, but distinct from, similitude, allegory, metaphor, simile and other figurative forms. This is a much narrower concept of the parable than is commonly held. This situation gives rise to some confusion when referring to parable. Were we accustomed to using the Hebrew word "mashal" when referring to examples of figurative sayings such as riddles, fables, similitudes, parables, example stories or other forms, and the word parable, when referring to that form which is similar to, but yet distinct from similitude, we would likely experience less confusion in our endeavor to discern the nature of a parable.

I will use the word 'parable' in the broadest sense, that of mashal, however I believe that in everyday usage today it is thought of mainly in the sense of proper parable and similitude, as they are depicted by Smith. Nevertheless even in common usage there are examples which would not fit either of those categories but which are commonly called parables. For this reason it seems least confusing to use the word in its

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17. Ibid., 17.



broadest sense.

The advantage of accepting the broad classification of parables is born out by the fact that in most cases two or more figures of speech are employed in one illustration and in such cases a narrow classification is either impossible or most difficult. Joachim Jeremias believes that by categorizing one is doing a disservice to them.

"To force the parables of Jesus into the categories of Greek rhetoric is to impose upon them an alien law." 18

Nevertheless it seems essential that one understand the source of the strands of thread that have been woven together to provide the finished garments which are a source of both warmth and beauty to the wearers.

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18. Jeremias, op. cit., 18.



C. Interpretation.

There has not been agreement in regard to the interpretation of the parables by those who have taken it upon themselves to study them. Until quite recent times the allegorical method of interpretation was the accepted method. Augustine was perhaps the foremost exponent of the allegorical approach to the parables. He, along with the majority of biblical scholars failed to recognize the principle, that the parable was meant to embody only one point. The allegorists sought to expound the message of the parables point by point. They were not content to accept the obvious application but through allegory sought to find something in the parables which they believed lay hidden beneath the surface.

It was Adolph Julicher who began a new epoch in the interpretation of the parables. He developed the thesis that a similitude (or parable) has but one point, whereas an allegory has many points of comparison. The first edition of Julicher's work, "Die Gleichnisreden" came out in 1886. Although Julicher's thesis came to be accepted as proven in essence, he was attacked for overstating his case. Julicher is thought to have oversimplified the message of the parable in many cases. He and his followers often failed to recognize the organic wholeness of the parable. Thus along with the allegorists Julicher and his followers often seemed to miss the point of the parable. The allegorist loses the unity of the parable by breaking it down into a number of small pieces which by themselves are either meaningless or misleading. On the other extreme however



are those who endeavor to oversimplify, they are too prone to look for one principle free of ornament rather than the answer to a concrete problem in life. A. T. Cadoux casts a helpful light upon the problem under discussion.

"It is the outstanding merit of Julicher's great work (*Die Gleichnisreden Jesus*) that it insisted upon the difference between parable and allegory as vital to the understanding of the parables of Jesus. But though allegory, being merely representative, touches that which it represents at many points, while the parables essential function is to evoke a judgment in one field and secure its application in another, it does not therefore follow that there is only one point of contact between the story of the parable and the other field to which we carry the judgment evoked by the story. Indeed, it is comparatively seldom that it is so. The judgment elicited by the story is generally a judgment upon a more or less complex situation, and there is always a certain contact between the people and things of this situation and those to which the judgment is carried."<sup>19</sup>

"A good parable is an organized whole in which each part is vital to the rest; it is the story of a complex and sometimes unique situation or event, so told that the outstanding features of the story contribute the indication and nature of its point."<sup>20</sup>

Cadoux, in these statements, is helpful in that he sets the various emphasis of interpretation in their proper perspective. We are still left with the conclusion that there is but

19. Cadoux, op. cit., 50.

20. Ibid., 52.



one main point, however, at the same time we are made aware that although the bulk of the content of the parables may be subordinate to the main point it is nevertheless essential and relevant to a proper understanding of the main point.

Smith believes there are only two obvious examples of allegory in the Synoptic Gospels. These are Mark's parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (12:1 - 12), and Matthew's version of the Unwilling Guest (22:1 - 14). He believes these parables lack all reality as accounts of what might happen in every day life. He doubts that a landlord would repeatedly risk the lives of his servants and finally his son in order to collect a rent. The tenants would not be able to gain possession of the land in this way.

Guests are not ordinarily murdered for failing to accept a dinner invitation and guests brought in from the street would not be punished for being unsuitably dressed.

Therefore, Smith says that these parables exhibit obvious allegory while other parables are only suggestive of allegory. It is generally held that the gospel writers provided the element of obvious allegory that is found in the synoptics. Form criticism has been a helpful development along these lines. Through the process of transmission the parables of Jesus, like the remainder of the biblical literature has undergone some change. Rather than being annoyed with this process, however, we should be thankful that the essential message contained therein has been so well preserved.



Up to this point I have discussed allegorical interpretation, but I have not elaborated upon the view which gave rise to allegorical interpretation. Jeremias refers to it as the 'hardening theory.'<sup>21</sup>

Stated quite simply the question is as follows: Were the parables spoken to hide or illuminate the truths embodied therein? Perhaps it is not unfair to say that Mark is responsible for the misunderstanding that has persisted on this subject. Mk. 4:10 - 12 reads as follows in the Revised Standard Version:

"10 And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable.

11 And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables:

12 That seeing they may see, and not yet perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them."

Jeremias reviews quite conclusive evidence to support the theory that v. 11f. are an insertion placed into an older context. The evidence is based mainly upon form criticism. It may also be recalled that 'mashal' meant riddle as well as parable. In order to render the contrasting parallelism of the two clauses v. 11a and v. 11b the Greek word 'parable' must be given its Hebrew equivalent 'mashal', or riddle. Jeremias points out that this gives the required antithesis:

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21. Jeremias, op. cit., 11.



to you the secret is revealed; those outside are confronted by riddles.<sup>22</sup>

There is a great deal of additional evidence which tends to set ones mind at ease with regard to this seemingly contradictory statement which is credited to Jesus.

Jesus realized that his message was urgent, he therefore would not likely endeavor to obscure the truth. He was considered to be a great teacher, the task of any teacher is to make clear those things which are obscure.

It may well be that the clarity of Jesus' parables served to confuse the more scholarly of his followers. There is today a principle prevalent which suggests that simplification of thought and expression is indicative of superficial understanding. This was quite possibly true in first century Palestine as well as in the vast holdings of the Roman Empire. This being the case, the expositors of Jesus' teaching would naturally endeavor to prove that what appeared to be the obvious lesson or point in the parables was not really the intended point at all. Such men would see the essential truths of the parables embodied beneath the surface, available only to those who were capable of folding back and rejecting the externals.

As was pointed out in the introduction, the evangelists were looking upon Jesus' ministry in retrospect. To them it was quite obvious that, seeing the people did not see and hearing they did not hear. This was an observation clear and accurate. It is perhaps little wonder that they would embody in their

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22. Ibid., 13.



writing the suggestion that this was the way Jesus had intended the parables to be received. Jesus made the same observation with regard to Isaiah and the people to whom he spoke.



## CHAPTER 2

### THE SITUATION IN LIFE WHICH THE PARABLES OF JESUS CAME

#### A. Political and Economic background.

The intense interest that is shown toward the religious and cultural aspects of our Hebrew forefathers often tends to overshadow the political and economic aspects of their background. In order to grasp something of the intended significance of the parables, both for the people to whom they were first spoken, and to our own generation, a brief summary of the political and economic background will prove helpful.

Joseph Klausner, a highly respected Jewish scholar, in his book, "Jesus of Nazareth," discusses with clarity and from authoritative sources the most significant features of Palestinian political and economic life.

It was the Maccabees who were responsible for building Palestine into a formidable political power. Prior to the period of the Maccabees, Judaea was a small province of Persia and Syria, not particularly noteworthy from a political point of view.

Beginning with the reign of the Maccabaeans the borders of Judaea were expanded through numerous military engagements until its boundaries became practically identical with those of David and Solomon. Among the lands conquered by the Maccabaeans were Samaria, Edom, part of Moab, lower Galilee, upper Galilee, Gadara, Amathus, Pella, Dium, Hippas, Gerasa, Gauloms, Seleucia, Rafia, Anthedon and Gaza. Although this list is not complete it gives one some idea of the vast extent



of the Maccabæan conquests. The remarkable feature of the conquests lies in the fact that the entire area was successfully Judaised. Those who refused to become Jews were destroyed and the area was repopulated with Jews.

Klausner seems to defend the ruthless manner in which these Jewish patriots built their empire. He believes the end justified the means.

"Only by such conquests and forced conversions could Judaism be established in its ancestral home and become a power, strong politically and socially, so that even the Romans, great conquerors though they were, were forced to take them seriously: otherwise the Jews must have remained a negligible quantity both in religion and civilization. Such, then, constitutes what the great Maccabæan conquerors accomplished for Judaism, and, therefore, for the whole of humanity as well!"<sup>23</sup>

The deterioration of Judaea began, Klausner suggests, in the year 65 B.C. with the civil war brought on by Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II who were rivals for the throne. But for the influence of Antipater the Edomite, who was Herod's father, Hyracanus would have been content to have accepted the high priesthood and let Aristobulus be the ruler. Intervention in the ensuing civil war came from both Aretas of Arabia and Pompey of Rome.

For the next thirty years war upon war was fought, each one slowly spelling out the inevitable decline of power of the Jewish nation. The affection which the Jewish people had for

23. Joseph Klausner, Jesus of Nazareth, (New York, 1926), 137.



the Maccabees was always in evidence. They were willing to amass themselves under their leadership time and again and thus it was that in battle after battle they were slaughtered by the thousands. The Romans eventually divided the Jewish kingdom into five districts and when that proved ineffective tried other forms of political organization in order to suppress the fanatical fervor of the Jews. Thousand upon thousand died in battle and many more were carried into slavery. Cassius is said to have carried away thirty thousand Jews into slavery after having captured Tarichaea.

In 49 B. C. civil war broke out in Italy and continued for about 30 years.

"Within this period Palestine four times changed masters. Owing to the quarrel between Pompey and Julius Caesar, Aristobulus was poisoned and his son, Alexander, put to death. After the battle of Pharsalis and Pompey's death (48) Hyrcanus (or rather Antipator, since Hyrcanus was but his tool) went over to the winning party, Julius Caesar.

Antipator was ever one to support the stronger side and now to show his devotion to his new master he did not spare his Jewish soldiers. In the year 47 he sent three thousand Jews to help Julius Caesar, and in 45 provided a Jewish troop to support Caesar's general, Antistius Vetus. For this Jewish blood he was well rewarded: Caesar made him "Epitropos" (i.e., Procurator or vice regent) a post to which after Herod, Roman officials were appointed, and Hyrcanus "Ethnarch" (Chief of the people, . . .) But this latter was for appearance sake:



the real government was in Antipator's hands and he appointed his son Phassel, Governor of Jerusalem and district, and his son Herod, Governor of Galilee.<sup>24</sup>

The father and his two sons ruled tyrannically and were hated by the people over which they ruled.

Mattathias Antigonus, the last king of Maccabean stock became king of Judea by defeating Phassel, Hyrcanus II and Herod, with the aid of the Parthians and Jewish supporters. Following the rise to the throne by Mattathias Antigonus in 40 there followed a fierce war between Herod, the Jewish Edomite king supported by the Romans and Mattathias Antigonus, the Jewish Maccabean king supported by the Parthians.

Herod took advantage of this period of warfare to seek out and kill the bands of Zealots (present day guerrilla fighters) who were concentrated mainly in Galilee. Herod was successful in his siege of Galilee and Samaria and besieged Jerusalem. This he interrupted in 37 to go to Samaria in order to marry Mariamne, the grand daughter of Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. Thus for political reason Herod attached himself to the Maccabean family.<sup>25</sup>

Klausner pictures the siege of Jerusalem in these words:

"Large numbers were killed in the course of it, and the large siege culminated in the final attack, the nature of which appalled even Herod's stony heart. When the Romans entered the city they spared none, men women and children, old and

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24. Ibid., 140.

25. Ibid., 144.



young, tender girls and aged women; in the houses, markets, streets and even in the temple they slaughtered human beings like sheep . . . By the time that "Herod the Great" came to the throne (37 B. C. E.) not only the royal city, Jerusalem, but the entire land of Israel, was a wilderness."<sup>26</sup>

By the time of his death, Herod had sought and gained fame but not from his own people, from his own people he earned and received loathing.

Archelaus, his son, ruled in a like manner to his father for ten years, (4 B. C. - 6 A. D.). The Emperor Augustus eventually exiled him to Gaul and seized all of his possessions. Judaea, Samaria and Idumaea were attached to Syria under the rule of a Roman Governor or Procurator. The Procurator who resided at Caesarea had sweeping powers over the religious and political life of the people. The Procurator for example had the right of appointment of the High Priests and even took charge of the robes of the High Priest. The Jews were humiliated by their foreign rulers and thus yearned passionately for the day when the Messiah would come and crush the foreign oppressors even more viciously than they themselves had been oppressed.

The promise of second Isaiah was in sharp contrast to the facts. Klausner relates the actual conditions.

"Slavery to foreign governments, wars, tumults and torrents of blood. Instead of all nations being subject to Judah, Judah was subject to the nations. Instead of the "riches of the Gentiles," godless Rome exacted taxes and tribute.

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26. Ibid., 144.



Instead of "kings being her nurrin' fathers," there comes Pompey and his army. Instead of the Centiles "bowin' down with their faces to the ground" and "lickin' the dust of their feet," comes a petty Roman official with unlimited power over Judah.<sup>27</sup>

In this situation Flausner sees an antithesis between the ideal an' the fact. To the Christian it was Jesus who provided the synthesis. In this task the parables played no small part.

Copernius was the first Procurator, his superior was Quirinius, governor of Syria. A census was taken upon orders from Quirinius. He wished to set up a new tax standard due to the fact that Judaea had been transferred from Jewish to Roman control. The census met with such opposition that a rebellion threatened for a while. Although the census was carried out without rebellion it brought about a uniting of the numerous rebel groups. Thus the groups known as the Zealots came into existence.

" . . . the Zealots, a body of men zealous for the Jewish Law and national honour, men who, in their zeal were regardless of political state of country and people and demanded but one thing - that the people rise up in solid revolt against the Romans. It was, they held, an unheard of indignity that the Jews should be enslaved by flesh and blood; the king of Israel could be none other than God himself, and not an idolatrous Roman Emperor. Thousands and tens of thousands

27. Ibid., 169.



followed Judah the Galilean and joined the Zealots. Right up to the destruction of the temple it was they who everywhere led the riots and revolts.<sup>28</sup>

There was a succession of Procurators between Coponius and Pontius Pilate. The latter was Procurator from 26 to 36 A. D. Pilate proved himself to be a tyrant who had no respect for justice. He seized upon opportunities to further humiliate and oppress his Jewish subjects. The bitterness which he nurtured in the people eventually brought about his dismissal by Vitellius, Governor of Syria.

Galilee and Transjordania were ruled during Jesus' lifetime by Herod Antipas. He was in control from 4 A.D. until 39 A.D.

Klausner says that Herod inherited from his father a love of building as well as a love of women. He built many buildings during his reign, none of which were very pleasing to the Jews. Like his father before him, Antipas gained a measure of respect from the Greeks and Romans and at the same time maintained control over the Jews.

During the various sieges and rebellions that had taken place 100,000 of the finest Jewish humanity had been slaughtered. Considering the size of the population, this figure represented a great loss. It was little wonder that there was a yearning for peace by many as well as a yearning for revenge by others.

Such were the underlying political factors of Jesus'

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28. Ibid., 162.



environment. An example of the effect upon his ministry is readily found in the eagerness of many of his followers to make of him a political king. In retrospect there is evidence to show that Jesus demonstrated a keen sensitivity toward the dynamic political factors that had moulded the thinking and the actions of first century Palestinians.

### Economic Conditions

Many of the parables deal with various aspects of agriculture. This is not at all surprising, for Jesus grew up in Galilee and Galilee was predominantly agricultural. It is rather interesting to note, however, that Jesus did not choose his disciples from among the agricultural population. The disciples were for the most part artisans and fishermen. Perhaps this is not too significant. To put forth a reason for this would at this point be pure conjecture and of little or no value.

The agricultural population of Palestine fell into three classifications. The majority were "small holders." These folk we would call marginal farmers. They produced primarily for their own consumption. The small portion they were able to produce over and above subsistence requirements they used to exchange for other necessities. These "small holders" were often forced to hire themselves out in order to make ends meet or to pay debts incurred. Any misfortune in the form of illness or poor crops might mean the relinquishing of the land. The children of "small holders" were, of necessity, forced to hire themselves out as labourers. As there was never sufficient



property to be divided among the children, it was the custom to bequeath a double share to the oldest son.

"The other sons, not having land enough for their needs, were, in spite of themselves, turned into members of the "proletariat", the class which owns nothing but its power to work. When no work is forthcoming they are reduced to the level of the "unemployed labourers," and become beggars or robbers and brigands."<sup>29</sup>

There were a large number of farmers who were somewhat better off than the "small holders." Klausner refers to these folk as the "wealthy proprietors." On the top rung of the ladder were still another group, who were few in number, referred to as "men of property".

The bulk of the trading in agricultural produce arose from the surplus production of the middle class land owners. There were numerous markets in the land.

The "men of property" were for the most part, connected with the high priestly or royal families. Their property was supervised by "stewards". The owners, who were wealthy, were usually either absent travelling or lived in the city. Jesus used this situation as a basis for some of the parables. The parable of the Wise Steward, Luke 13:42 - 48, is perhaps the best example. It was the duty of the steward to supervise the work of the hired servants, to hire or dismiss them if necessary.

There was a large hiring class who hired themselves out for a day or more. The period might be as long as six years.

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29. Ibid., 179.



There were also a number of unemployed. The parable of the householder who went out to hire workmen refers to this group. When workmen were hired the two parties concerned usually made an agreement by word of mouth. Speaking of the Hebrew labourer Klausner says:

" . . . the position of the Hebrew labourer was better than that of the Roman, Egyptian or Babylonian labourer, both by reason of the simpler conditions and fewness of men of great wealth, and also because of the democratic spirit infused into daily life by the Scribes and their successors, the Pharisees and Tannaim."<sup>30</sup>

"Beside the peasant pure and simple, there were to be found in Palestine of Jesus' time varieties of the same class:

(a) the contractor or middle man, who undertook to carry out the required work and pay all taxes and, in return, received a half, third or quarter of the produce.

(b) The tenant farmer, . . . who received seed, implements and beasts of burden from the owner of the land, but tilled the ground by himself and, as say, received a half, third or quarter of the produce . . . In Palestine they were not so common since the "householder" and "small holder" predominated . . . the tenant farmers played an important part (however) and, as may be seen from the Gospel parable of the "Wicked Husbandmen," there was strife and enmity between them and the propertied class.

(c) There was also the "lessee" who did not receive but gave

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30. Ibid., 181.



a fixed portion of the produce in lieu of rent, so that if the land produced less than this portion the lessee was the loser, and if more he stood to gain.

(d) Finally there was the hirer, who differed from the lessee in that he paid in money and not in produce but was in other respects identical with the lessee.<sup>31</sup>

There were also other forms of servants which I will not take time to enumerate. Slavery also was prevalent in Palestine. Palestinian slaves did not suffer the abuses of some slaves but the institution nevertheless existed and was accepted. The possibility of the ill treatment of slaves lay open. Doubtless to say it was practised at times.

The Jews were skilled in the art of trading and it is evident that trade and commerce flourished in Jesus' day. The great variety of economic goods produced stimulated trade both internal and external. The frequent pilgrimages to Jerusalem served to stimulate trade. There was a degree of specialization and thus trade between towns.

"Sharon in Judaea sold its wines and bought bread, Jericho and the Jordan valley sold their famous fruits for bread and wine. The Judaean Shefela had a superabundance of bread and oil, and Galilee of corn and vegetables.

So prevalent was trade within the country that we actually find in the High Priests prayers on the Day of Atonement, a prayer for "a year of trade." Alike in Jerusalem and every considerable Judaean and Galilaean town (Tiberias, Sephoris), etc. the merchants and craftsmen had their markets and booths:

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 181.



the booth of the cobblers, of the dyers, of the flax dealers, of the spice merchants, of the cotton dealers and of the clothiers; the market of the bakers, of the weavers of the metal workers, of the glass makers, of the carpenters, of the wool merchants, of the cattle breeders - the cattle market, and so on.<sup>32</sup>

There were various methods of taxation exercised. There is no evidence of complaint against the Maccabees' taxation scheme, however, there was much dissatisfaction expressed against the taxation system introduced by Herod. He apparently taxed the people beyond endurance in order to secure funds for his extensive building enterprises and other projects which gave him high esteem in the eyes of the outside world.

Taxes were collected on a concession basis. The tax collectors paid the government a fee for the right of collecting the tax. It was assumed that the tax collectors, so called "publicans," would then exploit their franchise to the highest possible degree. Thus tax collectors were placed in the same category as bandits and robbers. Both the Talmud and the Gospels record the words "publicans and sinners" as being synonymous.<sup>33</sup>

The Roman Procurators were the most severe of all the rulers in regard to tax collection. Most of the necessities of life such as water, food, shelter and clothing were taxed heavily. In addition there were other special taxes.

The economic conditions of the region of Palestine played

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32. Ibid., 186.

33. Ibid., 187.



er important role in contributing to the unrest and dissatisfaction of the people. History has revealed the bitterness that inevitably finds expression in people who are economically depressed. Jesus lived and worked among such a people.

It is interesting to note also that, the people, although not all engaged in agricultural pursuits were close to agriculture and understood a great deal about farming. A few examples of parables dealing with the agricultural situation remind us of the fact that Jesus endeavored to use examples familiar to all.

The Sower found in Matt. 13:3-23, Mark 4:2-20 and Luke 8:4-15 provides a ready example. Others include the Mustard Seed, Matt. 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32, Luke 13:18-19, The Wicked Tenants of the Vineyard, Matt. 21:33-45, Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19.

The Budding Fig Tree, Matt. 24:32-33, Mark 13:28-29, Luke 21:29-31, the Leaven, Matt. 18:33, Luke 13:20-21. Other examples found only in Matthew are as follows: the Tares 13:24-30, the Unmerciful Servant 18:23-25, the Labourers in the Vineyard 20:1-16, the Ten Talents, 25:14-30, the Sheep and the Goats 25:31-46. Mark records the parable of the Seed Growing Silently, 4:26-29. In Luke we find the following pertaining to agriculture: the Watchful Servants 12:35-38, the Wise Steward 12:42-48, the Barren Fig Tree 13:6-9, the Master and the Servant 17:7-10 and the parable of the Pounds 19:11-27.

It seems obvious that the subject matter of the parables



was not foreign to the ears of Jesus' listeners. By using situations and facts from everyday life that were familiar and common to all, Jesus was able to illuminate essential truths of life which had previously been obscured from the eyes of the people.



### B. Religious Conditions

The religious conditions in Jesus' day are perhaps more familiar than some aspects of Palestinian life. It is not my intention, therefore, to dwell on this subject very long. Klausner draws attention to four religious groups that were prevalent in Jesus' day. These four groups exerted the main influence upon the religious life of the Palestinian Jews.

The Zealots, who were associate primarily with political activity, were a reactionary group, who expressed their love and respect for the law by a willingness, perhaps an eagerness, to protect it with the sword. In their zeal they became carried away with themselves and were often responsible for needless killing and plundering.

They were political and religious extremists who were impatient for the day of liberation of the people to arrive. They originated from the same strain as the Pharisees, and being fundamentally pharisaic they preserved the messianic idea. They conceived the messiah as a political-religious figure. The Zealots must have been impatient and disappointed with Jesus' concept of the "suffering servant" messiah. At least one, and perhaps more of the disciples had been associated with the Zealot movement. Jesus may have had to guard against unleashing the emotional fervor of these people. They appear to have been more of a hindrance than a help to Jesus and the message which he brought.

The Essenes present a contrast to the Zealots. The Essenes were an ascetic group who lived by a high moral code.



Like the Zealots they were a strain of the Pharisees.

"Essenism might be described as a great human - national vision. It embodied in a remarkable way the moral socialism of the prophets: it was the first social Utopia. Whereas the system of the Zealots was a socialism imposed by violence, a species of bolshevism on its negative sides, Essenism embraced all the positive characteristics of socialism: equality, community of possessions, opposition to bloodshed even in sacrifices, and above all, labour and manual work."<sup>34</sup>

The Essenes have come into much prominence with the discovery of The Dead Sea Scrolls. We will doubtless learn more of these people who seem to have been the forerunners of the monastic movement. Jesus has been said to have been an Essene but as Klausner points out, there is not sufficient evidence to support this claim. Says Klausner, ". . . Christians seek to save the soul of the individual: the Essenes sought to save the community by social means."<sup>35</sup>

I must hasten to add, however, that Klausner saw all of Christianity as derived from Pharisaism supplemented with Essenism. This gives us some indication of the Jewish concept of Christianity.

The Pharisees are the most familiar of the religious people of Jesus' day. This is perhaps to be expected for they were surely the largest and the most influential of all those who played some part in first century Judaism.

"The Pharisees preserved and developed the tradition of

34. Ibid., 210.

35. Ibid., 211.



the Fathers, and with this tradition as their basis they gave many rules to the nation not to be found in the Law of Moses. They followed the more strinct interpretations of the rules of the Torah, but adopted more lenient interpretations in all pertaining to punishments.<sup>36</sup>

Klausner goes on to say that they were remarkable for their high ethical standards and their aloofness from the pleasures of life.

This account of the Pharisees Klausner has taken from Josephus. The Pharisees were a highly respected group. They were the religious elite, representatives of the middle class.

Jesus criticized them primarily for their inflexibility and their equal emphasis upon each part of the law and the tradition. Whereas Jesus believed in living by principles which were applicable to different situations the Pharisees lived by hard and fast rules which were not to be tampered with. They lived by the letter of the law but they did not grasp the spirit of the law.

The Sadducees were not of a Pharisaic strain. They were not as religious a group as the Pharisees although they were the priestly party. The Sadducees unlike the Pharisees did not accept the tradition or the so called Oral Law. They were popular mainly with the wealthy and the political leaders. They believed that man, not God was responsible for moulding man's destiny. Like the Pharisees, the Sadducees were scrupulous in their observance of the Law of Moses. They did not believe in the concept of the resurrection and they did not develop the



messianic concept. They were practical men rather than idealists.

Such were the predominant religious movements in Palestine during Jesus' lifetime. The followers of Jesus came from all of these groups, although it is quite likely that the majority of Jesus' followers came from a group who were associated with none of these. The "ammehaaretz" were the religious cast offs of Jewish society. They were the group for whom no one cared. Publicans and sinners, prostitutes and thieves, people who had lost their sense of purpose in life, people who had lost their own self respect, of such were the ammehaaretz. To these people Jesus brought new hope, a new faith, not only faith in God but faith in themselves. These people were undoubtedly moved by the simplicity of the language of the parables. The parables communicated a message of hope to these folk who could see little hope in the quiet asceticism of the Essenes, the fierce patriotism of the Zealots, the proud legalism of the Pharisees and the harsh realism of the Sadducees. Thus we will turn our thoughts now to the message that they found in the parables. We will endeavor to place ourselves in their shoes and hear the message as they heard it.



C. The "Sitz im Leben"

Not an infrequently used plea today exhorts men and women to "get back to the bible." Radio programmes boom into our homes, leaflets are distributed and door to door evangelists plead with us to "get back to the bible." This is undoubtedly very good advice for those who have left the bible behind. There are those people, however, who having read the bible regularly, do not find the complete satisfaction for which they crave. There may be several reasons for this tragedy in the lives of 20th Century man. One of these reasons surely lies in our failure to grasp the message as it was delivered to its original listeners. We must endeavor to place ourselves, as far as is possible in the same situation as the original people to whom the message was first spoken. It is important to remember that practically all of the literature of the bible was first spoken orally. This is certainly true of the parables. They were not first written by someone in a solitary pensive mood. They were spoken by a specific man at a particular time to certain people. They were the product of crisis. It was not until long after they had been spoken that they were written down.

Although we have proof that oral transmission was surprisingly accurate and we can therefore feel reasonably sure that the words of the parables came to us in authentic form, we must recognize the fact that the details surrounding the parables, seemingly of minor importance were not well preserved. For this reason we find the parables, as they are



recorded in the three gospels, with a contradictory background and in some cases contradictory conclusions. The situation of the early church was different than the situation to which Jesus addressed himself. Whereas, Jesus spoke in a time of crisis, and he endeavored to stress the urgency of his message, the writers of the gospels endeavored to pass on to their fellow man a code to live by.

If we are to fully appreciate and understand the message of the parables we must do more than casually read them, we must seek to capture the drama and the vividness of the dynamic moments from which they were uttered.

The "form-criticism," school has brought about a new awakening in our understanding of the gospels. C.H. Dodd in his book, "Parables of the Kingdom," and Joachim Jeremias in "The Parables of Jesus" provides a comprehensive and a scholarly approach to this phase of our understanding of the parables.

Jeremias outlines the problem at hand in the following words:

"As they have come down to us, the parables of Jesus have a double historical setting. (1) The original historical setting of the parables, as of all his utterances, is some specific situation in the pattern of the activity of Jesus. Many of the parables are so vividly told that it is natural to assume that they arise out of some actual occurrence. (2) But subsequently, before they assumed a written form, they "lived" in the primitive Church, of whose proclamations,



preaching and teachin', the words of Jesus were the context, in its missionary activities, in its assemblies, or in its catechetical instruction. It collected and arranged the sayings of Jesus according to their subject-matter, created a setting for them, sometimes modifying their form, expanding here, allegorizing there, always in relation to its own situation between the cross and the Parousia."<sup>37</sup>

Jeremias formulates seven laws of transformation which are an aid to the recovery of the original meaning of the parables of Jesus. They seem to be of such value to our understanding that they warrant consideration.

"1. There is the early appearance of a tendency to elaborate the parables.

2. The primitive church has largely transferred to the community parables which were originally addressed to opponents or to the crowd.

3. Hence there has occurred a frequent shifting of emphasis to the hortatory aspect. especially from the eschatological to the hortatory.

4. The primitive Church related the parables to its own actual situation, characterized by the Gentile environment, the Gentile mission, and the delay of the Parousia: in terms of this situation the Church interpreted and expanded the parables.

5. The primitive Church increasingly tended to interpret the parables allegorically with a hortatory purpose.

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37. Joachim Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, (London, 1954), 20.



6. The primitive Church formal collections of parables, and this gave rise to the fusion of parables.

7. The primitive Church gave a setting to the parables and this often produced a change in the meaning; in particular by the addition of generalizing conclusions, many parables acquired a universal meaning.<sup>38</sup>

This statement sums up the reasons for the veil which has been drawn over the parables. As Jeremias pointed out, not all of the parables have been veiled. The task at hand now leads us to examine some of the specific parables in which we can detect a lack of originality and to discover something of the original meaning and significance.

The parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard has been subjected to numerous interpretations, and therefore, provides a suitable starting point for a detailed study of specific parables. This parable is recorded in Matthew 20:1-16.

This parable has been the source of much allegorizing. Theosis saw each summons as a symbol of the various calls to redemption in history. Origen saw the summons as representing the stages of life at which a man became Christian. Jeremias sees the point of the parable in the distribution of the wages rather than in the summons to labour. Some have seen the parable as a parable of judgment. Because those who were called first complained and were dissatisfied they cut themselves off from God's salvation. However, had this been the case they would not have received any wage.

For Matthew the parable represented the reversal of rank

38. Ibid., 88.



and for this reason he apparently added verse 16, which embodies the thought he found in Mark 10:13.

This is not a convincing conclusion due to the fact that there was but a few minutes difference between the times of payment.

Verse 16 appears to have been added as a generalizing conclusion. If the original parable ended at verse 15 it asked a question. The listener would have had to supply his own answer.

Lk 20:15 and 16 - Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?

Bearing in mind our discussion of the economic conditions of the day we note that these men were hired from the ranks of the unemployed. It would seem, therefore, that the master of the house chose out of pity and compassion to give them sufficient money to buy enough food and other necessities that their miserable lot might be somewhat relieved.

Jesus seems to be saying that as this man dealt arbitrarily with love and compassion towards the poor, so it is that God deals with man. God gives to man something beyond that which man deserves.

The questions which end the parable were undoubtedly addressed to those listeners to whom the parable applied. There were many who grumbled and murmured about Jesus and the gospel he preached. The Pharisees, for example, felt that because they had adhered religiously to the law they had earned recognition and reward in the eyes of God. A message of



salvation through grace was not well received by these self-righteous folk.

The context in which the parable is found shows that Matthew related the parable to Jesus and his disciples. As such it was used as a parable for instruction rather than as a means of defense of the gospel against its critics.

Dodd says of this parable:

"The point of the story is that the employer, out of sheer generosity and compassion for the unemployed, pays as large a wage to those who have worked for one hour only as to those who have worked all day. It is a striking picture of the divine generosity which gives without regard to the measure of strict justice. But its "Setting in life" must surely be sought in the facts of the ministry of Jesus. The divine generosity was specifically exhibited in the calling of publicans and sinners, who had no merit before God. The Kingdom of God is like that. Such is Jesus' retort to the complaints of the legally minded who cavilled at Him as the friend of publicans and sinners."<sup>39</sup>

The parable of the Lost Sheep, Luke 15:3-7 and Matthew 18:12-14, is another example of a parable which Jesus spoke to vindicate the good news against those who were belligerent and hostile toward it. Matthew places the parable in a different context than Luke. Matthew depicts the parable as addressed to the disciples. The emphasis is upon the necessity for searching out the lost sheep rather than upon the joy of the shepherd

39. C. H. Dodd, Parables of the Kingdom, (London, 1935), 123.



when the sheep is found.

Jeremias says that we may accept Luke's version with confidence:

" . . . , since in ~~remain~~ the concluding sentence in Matthew (xviii, 14) strikes the same note as the corresponding sentence in Luke (xv, 7): This rejoices the heart of God! For in Mt. xviii, 14, (1) the negative actually governs the second half of the sentence, and (2) the word *ra'wa* has the meaning 'pleasure'. Hence the original meaning of Mt. xviii, 14, is, 'There is joy in the heart of God when one of the very least is saved.' This agrees exactly with Luke xv, 7a."<sup>40</sup>

The evangelists were rather careless in assigning the proper setting to the parables. Not only are there contradictions with regard to setting between the three synoptic gospels but in Matthew the saying regarding the tree and the fruit is addressed to the crowd in 7:16-20 and at 12:33-37 it is addressed to the Pharisees. There is sufficient evidence to show that Jesus did not speak the parable to different groups at different times.

Jeremias lists over twenty examples of the parables that have been transferred in their setting. The general tendency seemed to be to address parables to the disciples that were originally addressed to the opponents of Jesus.<sup>41</sup>

There is also evident a change in emphasis in many parables from the eschatological to the hortatory emphasis.

<sup>40</sup>. Jeremias, op. cit., 29.

<sup>41</sup>. Ibid., 31.



"The primitive Church saw itself, and increasingly with the passage of time, standing midway between two crises, of which one belonged to the past, the other to the future. Standing thus between the Cross and the parousia, the Church looking for the guidance of Jesus, found itself forced by the altered conditions to interpret these parables of Jesus which were intended to arouse the crowd to a sense of the gravity of the moment, as directions for the conduct of the Christian community, thus shifting the emphasis from the eschatological to the hortatory interpretations."<sup>42</sup>

The parable of the Unjust Steward was interpreted by the primitive Church as containing teaching about the right use of wealth and the consequences of unfaithfulness whereas the key seems to be in Luke 16:8a, simply a call to action in time of crisis.

The first Century Church was a missionary church and it is therefore not too surprising to find some of the parables given this emphasis. The parable of the Great Supper is an example. In its original meaning it appears to have been, but another of the numerous parables which Jesus used as apologetic material in the face of his critics. Jesus implied that those to whom he was speaking had refused the invitation. They were the Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. In Matthew the parable is given an allegorical interpretation and in Luke the conclusion is allegorical. Luke 14:22f. outlines two invitations to the uninvited. The first refers to the publicans and sinners, the second to the gentiles.

42. Ibid., 33.



Luke 14:22 And the servant said, Lord it is done as thou hast commanded, ~~and~~ yet there is still room.

Father's version of the parable has troubled scholars for quite some time as there seems to be no reason why a man who is summoned from the street should be expected to be dressed for dinner. This has provided evidence to support the theory that this parable was intended as allegory. Because it is not a real life situation it is not meant to have direct interpretation. Jeremias says that the part about the guest has been added to the parable by the evangelist or his source. He believes that we have here two parables which were put together but actually do not belong together. There was the danger of misunderstanding. The call might be interpreted as having no obligations attached. Matthew or his source wished to develop the necessity for repentance. It remains for the reader to either accept or reject this approach. I feel that the argument has much merit, however the evidence is not entirely conclusive.

A group of five parables is referred to by Dodd as the "Parables of Crisis." The five parables are the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants, the Waiting Servants, the Thief at Night and the Ten Virgins. Dodd says of this group:

"It seems possible to give all these "eschatological" parables an application within the context of the ministry of Jesus. They were intended to enforce his appeal to men to recognize that the kingdom of God was present in all its momentous consequences, and that by their conduct in the presence of this tremendous crisis they would judge themselves



as faithful or unfaithful, wise or foolish. When the crisis had passed they were adapted by the Church to enforce its appeal to men to prepare for the second and final world crisis which it believed was approaching."<sup>43</sup>

These parables illustrate vividly the sense of urgency which Jesus instilled in his followers. The crisis was imminent, there was no time to lose. Perhaps it was this sense of urgency which seized his followers and prompted them to give up all they had in order to follow Jesus. The theme of all of these parables is preparedness. But the immediate crisis passed and it was the task of the early Church to reinterpret the parables in the light of their own situation.

The parable of the Thief at Night, Jeremias believes could well have developed from an incident familiar to all who listened to the parable being told. Someone's house was looted while it was left unguarded, thus Jesus took this as an example of the need for constant preparedness. It is evident from Luke 12:22 that the early Church applied the parable to the apostles and other church leaders.

The parable of the Ten Virgins as found in Matthew 25:1-13 depicts very clearly the manner in which the parables of preparedness were applied to the situation of the early Church.

". . . Matthew saw in the parable an allegory of the Parousia of Christ, the heavenly bridegroom: the Ten Virgins are the expectant Christian community, the 'tarrying' of the bridegroom (v. 5) is the postponement of the Parousia, his

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<sup>43</sup>. Dodd, op. cit., 174.



sudden coming (v. 6) is the unexpected incidence of the Parousia, the stern rejection of the foolish virgins (v. 11) is the final judgment."<sup>44</sup>

Jeremias does not see this as the message for the original listeners. He sees it as a possible illustration from a recent wedding. The element of suddenness is predominant.

'Behold the bridegroom cometh'.

The essential element is in the need to be prepared at all times for that which will surely come soon.

Although we will not examine the other parables in this group one can readily visualize the same theme throughout.

Jeremias concludes his discussion of this most important series of parables with this comment.

"The five Parousia - parables which we have discussed were originally a group of crisis - parables. They were intended to arouse a deluded people and their leaders to a realization of the awful gravity of the moment. The catastrophe will come as unexpected as the nocturnal housebreaker, as the bridegroom arriving at midnight, the master of the house returning from his far journey. See that you be not taken unawares! It was the primitive Church which first interpreted the five parables in a Christological sense and as addressed to the community, warning them not to become slack because of the delayed Parousia."<sup>45</sup>

A few words might be said with regard to collection and fusion of the parables. Long before the canon of the New

44. Jeremias, op. cit., 41.

45. Ibid., 52.



Testament came into being collection of the parables were made.

In Mark 4:1-34 we have a collection of parables and in addition at 2:18-22 a collection of three metaphors. This process gave rise to a fusion of parables, one of which we have already discussed, the parable of the Great Supper. In many cases only one or two features of one parable are fused into another. An example of this is found in Mark 13:33-37, The Parable of the Doorkeeper. The idea of the Master's journey to a far country is taken from the parable of the Talents and the concept of handing over authority to the servants comes from the parable of the Servant entrusted with Oversight.

An example of a case where a new parable came into being this way is found in Luke 13:24-30. Three similes from Matthew, 7:13f., 22f., and 11f. are linked with a conclusion from Matthew 25:10-12 to bring into existence the parable of the Closed Door.<sup>46</sup>

The evangelists or their sources were prone to adding to the parables generalizing conclusions which have the effect of directing ones attention from the intended point of the parable to the thought embodied in the conclusion. This can be very misleading if the tendency is not recognized. An example with which we have already dealt is the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. The generalizing conclusion which Matthew gave the parable, Matthew 20:16 was taken from a Marcan context, (the last shall be first and the first last). In the parable about the Unjust Steward the generalizing conclusion ('He that is unfaithful in that which is least is

46. Ibid., 74.



unfaithful also in much.')<sup>47</sup> Thus a crisis parable is depicted as a parable of moral teaching.

We must be aware of the fact that these insertions do not reflect the message of Jesus for his people, but rather, they are the words of Christian men and women interpreting Christ's message to the people of their day.

It is evident that I have done little more than present something of the task that lies before the student of the parables who follows the quest of the truths embodied therein. The quest is made increasingly difficult by our own bias which we cannot entirely escape regardless of our high regard for objectivity and impartiality. Even if we are able to grasp the message as it was meant for the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the publicans and sinners, we have also the task of projecting ourselves into their environment, their "sitz im leben". The task is obviously difficult, only a degree of success will result, nevertheless, experience has shown us that even a degree of success will be amply rewarding.

Both Jeremias and Dodd indicate that there has been a constant tendency by men to endeavor to enhance the words of Jesus. This process is still going on today. If we recognize what we are doing we have made one step in remedying the weakness. The next step will be more difficult, that is, stopping the process. A habit once begun is difficult to break. The third step, which we have just previewed, will involve spade work enabling us to dig down to the core of the message which is our Christian heritage. We are deeply indebted to the form-

47. Ibid., 89.



critics for focusing our attention upon the importance of  
the "sitz im leben," of the gospel message.



## CHAPTER 3

### PREACHING FROM THE PARABLES

Before discussing the parables as they relate to preaching, I wish to put forth the following quotations as an explanation and definition of what preaching is and of what its purpose is.

"A sermon is a revelation of some aspect of the reality of God in reference to some human need or condition . . . A sermon is by nature a disclosure, an unveiling, a revelation, . . . (The preacher's) real business is not so much to criticize life as it is to show where it exists, to reveal life to men and women in its fullness and richness, its height and depth, its length and breadth, eternal life, the life of God."<sup>48</sup>

Ferris's remarks are perhaps summarized in the following words of Phillips Brooks:

"Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality."<sup>49</sup>

Ferris draws out some of the essential features of effective preaching.

Preaching must be indicative rather than imperative. Preaching must be in the language of the people who are listening to the preacher. The sermon must be in the present tense because revelation is a contemporary experience.<sup>50</sup>

It does not take too much study for one to learn that the parable is perhaps the most relevant and most valuable resource available to the preacher. The parables are sermons

48. Theodore Parker Ferris, Go Tell The People, (New York, 1951) 17.

49. Phillips Brooks, Lectures On Preaching, (New York, 1877), 5.

50. Ferris, op. cit., 29.



themselves fulfilling the qualifications as I have outlined them. A parable is a revelation of some aspect of the reality of God in reference to some human need or condition. A parable is a disclosure, an unveiling, a revelation. The parables of Jesus certainly reveal life to men and women in its fullness and richness, its height and depth, its length and breadth, eternal life, the life of God. The parables are used to communicate the truth by man to men.<sup>51</sup>

The parables are obviously an intricate part of effective preaching. Jesus was, among other things, a preacher. He was not just a mediocre preacher but he was a highly effective preacher. When Jesus preached, thousands gathered around to hear him. In retrospect we say that this is not too surprising, but if we were to place ourselves back in first century Palestine we would be able to appreciate the dynamic of his preaching.

Had Jesus not been a highly effective preacher he would not have been able to attract the multitude who thronged to hear him preach.

What then was there about his preaching that made it effective? There is a preponderance of the indicative mode in Jesus' preaching. As we have noted this is the first condition that Ferris suggests necessary for effective preaching. The indicative mode is particularly in evidence in the parables that Jesus spoke. Instead of commanding the people to be good neighbors he told them the parable of the Good Samaritan.

This draws attention to a very important feature of the

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51. Ibid., 17.



parables, that is, the inherent demand for a judgment, which is present in the parables. While Jesus spoke in the indicative the message as it was received was in the form of an imperative. This also can be true of preaching and must be true of preaching if it is to be true to its purpose. It is one of the essential functions of the parable to evoke a judgment in one field and secure its application in another says A. T. Cadoux.<sup>52</sup>

"The judgement elicited by the story is generally a judgement upon a more or less complex situation, and there is always a certain contact between the people and things of this situation and those of the situation to which the judgement is carried. In Nathan's parable there is obviously a certain connection between the rich man and David, the poor man and Uriah, the ewe lamb and Bathsheba. And further than this, so long as the story of the parable is not unnaturally shaped into similarity with the features of the field to which it is applied, so long as the similarity grows naturally from the story, they may be multiplied with advantage, for then they assist the passage of judgment from one field to the other."<sup>53</sup>

The parable of the Prodigal Son draws out comparison on several points and elicits judgment to be made by the listener. Cadoux points out also that it is essential that the hearer pass judgement unhesitatingly. Where this is not the case the parable loses its effectiveness.<sup>54</sup>

Adults like children rebel at commands. They do not appreciate being told what to do. The sermon that explicitly says "do this" and "do that" is not well received. Man is not

52. Cadoux, op. cit., 50.

53. Ibid., 51.

54. Ibid., 56.



oblivious to his own actions and is willing to discipline and modify his behaviour if he feels discipline is self imposed. Self judgement must of necessity precede this, and in most cases the individual tends to rationalize.

"A special and notable use of the parable is to induce the hearer to a true judgement in a matter in which he is biased (especially self biased) by letting him to give a verdict on a similar case, the connection of which with his own he does not at first see, as in the case of David and Simon the Pharisee."<sup>55</sup>

The parables then, fulfill the first condition of effective preaching as outlined by Ferris. They speak in the indicative, yet at the same time they evoke a judgement which brings forth an imperative.

The second condition of effective preaching pertains to the language used. This brings to mind the accusations which Paul had to answer from some of the people at Corinth. There were some at Corinth who said that Paul was not a very eloquent preacher. The following two verses are an indication of the tone of his reply.

II Corinthians 2:1 and 2: "When I came to you brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

Lofty words are not always the best means of communicating the gospel. Jesus seemed to realize this. Often the congregat-

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55. Cadoux, op. cit., 57.



io receives a deeper message from the children's story than from the sermon in our own church services. This is perhaps not too surprising and it should certainly not be disturbing to us. As Ferris says:

"Christianity is a story; not a legend or myth, or an abstract principle. It is a true story which was once upon a time acted out in events. To those who were not original witnesses of the events themselves the story must be told."<sup>56</sup>

Buttrick gives us still deeper insight into the mind and the purpose of Jesus and the language he used to communicate himself.

"There was more than a natural human delight in a story, more than the fact that it is the oldest human language, and more than the unreceptiveness of His hearers to justify Jesus in the use of parables. . . The real world to Jesus was not the seen world; the real world was the unseen of which the seen is but the form. Heaven to us may be a dream of earth; but to Him earth was a broken and shadowy reflection of heaven. The material was ordained as a sign-language of the spiritual: "For the invisible things of Him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity." Jesus sees always a divine congruity between earth and heaven."<sup>57</sup>

The parables speak a language that is in many ways universal. They do not make use of lofty speech but rather they are right down on the grass roots level. As I pointed out in the discussion on figurative speech the language of the parables

56. Ferris, op. cit., 13.

57. George A. Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, (New York, 1931),  
vxi.



is simple and yet at the same time profound. It speaks with equal clarity and meaning to the labourer and the intellectual, the student of the arts as well as the scientist.

Ferris says that the language of the sermon must be the language that is understood by the people and he cites the parables as examples of Jesus' ability to communicate his message.

"When Jesus wanted to reveal to his people the meaning of the Kingdom of God, he did not turn to the language of the theological textbooks or the philosophical schoolrooms. He turned rather to the language of the people, inadequate though it might be. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who sows good seed in his field, like a mustard seed growing rapidly, like a thief coming in the night, like a king preparing a banquet for his son. And when Jesus wanted to reveal the nature of God he looked in the same direction for the language that he used. God is like a father looking for a son, like a shepherd looking for a single sheep, like a woman sweeping, looking for a lost coin. The fact that no human father is in any way good enough to be compared to God did not seem to worry Jesus. He counted on the intelligence of men and women to make the leap from the lesser things of their ordinary experience to the highest things in heaven and earth."<sup>58</sup>

There is no doubt as to the value of the parables in so far as language is concerned. The language of the parables is in many ways unique. It serves as a common denominator

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58. Ferris, op. cit., 28.



for the exchange of religious truths.

The third condition for the successful preacher is that the sermon must be, for the most part, in the present tense. Does this exclude the use of parables? On the contrary it seems to call for the use of parables for the parables are in a sense timeless. They embody a message which transcends time. Buttrick emphasizes the fact that in every age the parables possess modernity .

"They are more recent than to-day's newspaper; for a newspaper follows the fashions, and a fashion because it has become a fashion has begun to die. The parables utter the eternal verities by which all fashions, the shifting moods of an indifferent society, are judged. They are as recent as present breathing, as vivid in their tang as the "new" of immediate experience."<sup>59</sup>

The parables belong to the present as much as to the past. They more than meet the requirement of speaking in the present tense, they also illustrate the enduring nature of truth and of its application and relevance for people of all generations.

The preacher must of necessity be an artist. He must be able to paint picture after picture in quick succession in order that those who listen will be able to visualize the message as well as hear it. People must be given the opportunity of using their imagination that they may be transported to the uttermost parts of the earth.

The motion picture industry has developed many techniques

59. Buttrick, op. cit., xxix.



in the past few years in order to increase the life likeness of their productions. It is the intention of the motion picture industry to make the viewer feel that he is right in the center of the action that is taking place on the screen.

The techniques used to accomplish this end are actually nothing more or less than a stimulus to one's imagination. The preacher is endeavoring to place the realities of life and death before the eyes of his people. If he is to be effective he must of necessity use every technique possible to stimulate man's senses and, thus, his imagination in order that man may be brought to the point where he can see for himself the will of God as it relates to him as an individual. The preacher, for practical reasons can not use the same technique as the motion picture industry but his productions can be even more effective if he is willing to cultivate the talents God has given him and make use of the resources that are available.

As we have seen, the parables were one of the chief resources which Jesus used in preaching and in teaching. The parables entertained, they fascinated and yet they did still more. They argued, they judged, they illustrated and they spoke directly to the immediate situation in which men found themselves. All through the parables we are brought into an intimacy with the people who are the subject of them. We work, worry, laugh and cry along with them. In Buttricks words:

"We see the baking of bread and the patching of garments



we see the emergency of a friend borrowing a loaf at midnight for his sudden guest. Rich homes are drawn with a pencil equally shrewd - barns bursting with fatness, labourers not daring to eat until their master has broken his fast, and the unseemly scramble for the chief seats at the feasts of the mighty . . . "the whole gamut of human life is sounded - farmers at the plough, fishermen at their nets, a wedding procession moving through the dark with dancing torches, builders rearing towers, kings marching to their wars, and a widow pleading her cause in the persistence of despair before a heartless judge."<sup>60</sup>

Of such is the parable. The preacher who did no more than retell these stories to his people with clarity and understanding would no doubt render a most worthwhile service to God and to his fellow man.

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60. Ibid., xviii.



## CHAPTER 4

### THE PARABLES AS THEY REVEAL THE PERSONALITY OF JESUS

Although we have many artists' conceptions of what Jesus may have looked like, we do not really know very much about his physical appearance. Were we somehow given a true picture of Jesus, most of us would undoubtedly be surprised at the lack of resemblance to the picture which we have of him in our own mind.

The words of Jesus as they have been preserved for us serve to paint a portrait of the personality of Jesus which is surely more accurate than the physical portraits men have produced. The parables, I believe, serve to add both lustre and detail to the portrait of Jesus' personality. The parables not only communicate a message but they communicate the man through whom, and by whom the message came.

Phillips Brooks said that there are two essential elements in effective preaching, truth and personality. If we are to consider the parables as part of Jesus' preaching there is ample evidence to corroborate Brooks' statement. The words which Jesus spoke were important, but it was the personality behind the words which gave them such deep significance. Yet it is the words that reflect for us the personality. Through study and appreciation of the parables we become aware of some of the main characteristics of Jesus.

One is immediately impressed by the insight and sensitivity of Jesus. He was able to look beneath the surface of people's motives and needs and hence answer the unspoken



questions which were in their minds. This was surprising, even to those about him, and at times it was embarrassing to those who questioned him. An example may be cited from Mark in the conversation which precedes the parable of the Wicked Tenants of the Vineyard.

Mark 11:27-33 And they came to Jerusalem, and as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" Jesus said to them, "I will ask you a question: answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or by men? Answer me." And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From men?'" - they were afraid of the people for all held that John was a real prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Jesus did answer the real question that was in their minds with the parable of the Wicket Tenants which followed.

Not only does this serve to illustrate the keen insight of Jesus but it shows also the courage of Jesus. These people were not friendly to him; they were hostile and would not have appreciated the message embodied in the parable.

Another aspect of Jesus which is brought out in the parables is his familiarity with the details of nature and of inter-personal relationships. It is interesting to note that



Jesus was a carpenter and yet many of the parables are taken from the agricultural setting. Jesus was familiar with the process of planting and harvesting. He noted the fact that the farmer, having planted his crop, sat back to relax until that seemingly distant day when it would be ripe for harvest. Yet while he was still relaxing the harvest was suddenly upon him and he was not yet ready. Jesus had watched the seed being sown, as was the custom in Palestine, on unplowed ground. He noted the fate that had befallen the various seeds depending upon where they fell. Had Jesus not had an interest in the world around him and had he not been a very observant person he would not have been able to use such realistic and meaningful illustrations in the parables. Jesus possessed the ability and the desire to view his fellow man in his social, political and economic environment from a vantage point which enabled him to be comprehensive in his understanding, yet not at all remote.

Jesus seems to have been empathetic as well as, on occasions, sympathetic toward his fellow man. He can realistically depict the frenzied feeling of the bridesmaids who did not prepare for a late night wait, the self pity of the lazy man who buried his talent, and the joy of the father who welcomes his son back to his home.

It is often the emotional impact of the parables that arrests our attention. The parables do not exploit the emotions, but they nevertheless appeal to them.

Some say Jesus was an idealist; some say he was an ascetic



who saw life as unpleasing and endeavored to withdraw from the evil and unpleasant reality of life. If this were true, would he have been so familiar with the problems of the first century entrepreneur? Would he have demonstrated such intent and intimate knowledge of trade and commerce, with land tenure and agriculture and with wedding feasts?

Jesus had ideals, high ideals that he maintained and yet one cannot deny the fact that he was also a realist. He could appreciate the practical problems and the weaknesses of mankind.

Surely one makes a mistake by trying to fit Jesus into a category. He defies classification. He had what we might term today a well 'integrated' personality. He maintained a balance between extreme traits of character. Perhaps the only extreme trait that a modern day psychologist would have found in Jesus was his fervent love of people. It is this love that is either inherent or implied in all of the parables. This is even true of those parables that appear to rebuke. The rebuke is not for the sake of satisfaction in rebuking, but it is done in hope that he who is rebuked will come to understand the ways of God with man, and will eventually learn to appreciate the love of God for man.

This has provided a glimmer of the portrait of Jesus which the parables draw for us. As one's understanding of the parables increases, so does one's appreciation of the portrait and of the man depicted therein.



## CONCLUSION

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, . . . he did not speak to them without a parable, . . . Mark 4:33 and 34.

This statement overemphasizes the use that Jesus made of the parable, however, it does imply that the parables held a central place in the ministry of Jesus. To quote Henry J. Cadbury, one of the outstanding New Testament scholars of America:

"The figurative language of Jesus - parable, simile, metaphor - is extraordinarily pervasive in our gospels . . . Possibly Jesus regularly thought in such terms. Whether by induction or by illustration, spiritual truth came to him in close association with the observable data of outward life. He assumed a kind of mathematical consistency between the natural world and the spiritual, a consistency so taken for granted that he was scarcely aware of making the transition. His teaching merely called his hearers' attention to the application or extension of acknowledged tangible data. "From the fig tree learn its parable," he said, and he expected his hearers to do the same with all trees, with all nature and with the social life of men. It is evident, for example, that a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. It must be equally evident that demons are not cast out by Beelzebub. It is evident that one does not gather figs of thistles. So clearly an evil man cannot produce good fruit."<sup>61</sup>

Figurative language was popular before Jesus' day and

61. Henry J. Cadbury, Jesus: What Manner of Man, (New York, 1947), 21.



has remained so up to the present time. The significance and import of the parables does not lie essentially in the form in which they were spoken, but in the message they carried. The parables of Jesus were effective because they contained, not the advice of men, but the "Word of God" wrapped in a package that excited and still excites the imagination of the listener.

The parables of Jesus were not unique simply because they were parables. The parables of Jesus were unique in that they embodied the word of God in such a manner as to give it relevance to people in the situation in which they found themselves. The meaning of the parables was not obscure to the original listeners, it was direct and to the point. Yet despite this, there were those who "seeing did not see and hearing did not hear." For the most part the parables were both disturbing and convincing, for they depicted the relationship of God and man as being something natural, not remote and supernatural. There seems to be an appeal to reason, a plea exhorting man to observe his environment and to base his actions upon that which he learns through observation.

As we have noted, the parables do not always speak plainly to us today. Because we live in a different age, a different environment and do not possess the same mind as the Palestinian Jew, we do not always find the intended interpretation in the parables. We must also bear in mind the fact that the evangelists too, sometimes interpreted in error and thus the parables as we find them in the gospels may be misleading.



If we are to recapture the message of the parables we must formulate a sound basis for interpretation allowing for a degree of flexibility.

Generally a parable has but one main point, however, there may be other supplementary points of comparison in the analogy. One must always remember that the parables were spoken to common people. They were not intended for a select group. It should also be borne in mind that the parables usually called for a judgement to be made by the listener in one situation and then automatically to be transferred to himself. These three principles aid a great deal in interpretation. It should also be noted that the allegorical method of interpretation seems to be of little value now. Although this was the accepted method of interpretation for many centuries, scholarship no longer asserts that Jesus meant the parables to have allegorical significance.

Scholarship now suggests that the parables, as Jesus spoke them, could have taken place in real life. The details of the parables were true to the real life situation. Although some of the parables will not submit to this test today it is thought that the changes which have been made in transmission are responsible for some deviation.

The new light that has been cast upon the parables by the form critics cannot be overstressed. I also believe that this study has developed the importance of background knowledge and understanding for those who would seek truth. Words in themselves have meaning only when they are placed in the



the context in which they are spoken. If we are to fully appreciate the religious experience of our forefathers we must be willing to take time to learn o' their customs, their work, and their habits. We must endeavor to taste something of the flavor of their living conditions and learn of how they reasoned. In this way their experiences will take on a new meaning for us. The time spent while engaged in such study is amply rewarding for those who desire to know the will of God.

There are certain motifs which are recurrent in the parables. Many of the parables stress the biological feature of growth. Examples include the Mustard Seed, The Sower, the Wheat and the Tares, the Fig Tree and one might also include the parable of the Leaven.

There is some indication that these parables taught patience. During the apostolic age there was a feeling of impatience abroad. The day of the Lord had not yet come and some wondered why not. Perhaps the early Christians gave these parables their own interpretation. Cadbury deals with the eschatological significance of these parables as follows:

"It is this element of growth in connection with the idea of the kingdom that has provided a convenient escape from the more unwelcome apocalyptic view. Do not the parables of Jesus deal with the kingdom? Do not they represent it as slow fruition rather than a cataclysm? And may not Jesus have thought of the kingdom as present as well as future? Instead of the affirmative answer expected by these questions one may point out rather that several of these parables are concerned exactly



with that most apocalyptic of ancient metaphors - the harvest. The decisive outcome, the relation of the end to the beginning, are much more their concern than the intervening process . . . Can it be that the feature of the parables which, even before the term "realized eschatology" was invented, was relied on to water down a too futuristic interpretation of the kingdom of God, confirms rather the apocalyptic emphasis upon the future?"<sup>62</sup>

In several of the parables the motif of the absentee master is predominant. If this is to be interpreted as a characteristic of God's relationship to man it brings out a viewpoint that we tend to underemphasize. These parables suggest that man must live as though God were not present with him but is likely to return at any moment. As Cadbury suggests:

"Our business is to live as we should live, but without him. Normal rectitude, fidelity, diligence are expected of us and not emergency behavior."<sup>63</sup>

Cadbury makes a further observation that I wish to include in these concluding remarks. Jesus was very sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of man. We have examined some of the evidence that points this out. Cadbury finds further evidence to support this viewpoint in a rather unexpected way. He notes the number of excuses to be found in the parables. This is undoubtedly a direct outcome of Jesus' observations of his fellow man.

"As one reviews the array of excuses in Jesus' parables

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62. Ibid., 42.

63. Ibid., 45.



it becomes an all-in commentary on human nature. We still have with us persons who are too busy, or too lazy, too slow, or too much in a hurry, too improvident, too unaware, or too proud - to do as they should do. They can use the perverseness of the world as an excuse, or the unexpected delay of the time of reckoning, and if on the other hand the day of reckoning finds them unprepared, they will not recognize that it is their fault for having put other interests first that should have been secondary. In the light of the cumulative evidence most of this sensitiveness to human frailty goes back to the utterance of Jesus himself.<sup>64</sup>

The modern preacher does not speak in parables as Jesus spoke yet he does use a great deal of figurative speech. Jesus spoke in parables because his people were used to parables and Jesus was undoubtedly accustomed to thinking in this way. The 'illustration' is very similar to the 'parable' in many ways for it attempts to lay one situation along side another. It does not have the same effectiveness, however, due largely to the fact that present day illustrations do not evoke a judgement as we have noted parables did.

The parables are a valuable source of material to the present day preacher, but they are more than that. The mechanics and the technique of telling parables may well be studied to the advantage of the preacher. I might even go further to suggest that new parables be formulated, not to replace, but to supplement the parables of Jesus. This would

<sup>64</sup>. Ibid., 53.



only be made possible by a full and comprehensive study of the parables of Jesus.

The preacher who endeavors to expose the inherent message of the parables to his people must approach his task with humility and sincerity. He must realize that if he is to fulfill his calling it will be necessary for him to know whereof he speaks. The parables speak to any and all who would know God. The challenge confronting the preacher exhorts him to communicate not only the message, but also the personality of Jesus. To do this he must seek to establish an intimacy with Jesus' thought.

The preacher who deals with the parables in his sermons must, if nothing more, introduce his people to Jesus. If the introduction is properly made the way lies open for a satisfying relationship to develop.

B. T. D. Smith presents an excellent scholarly treatment of the parables. His book is most comprehensive, and as the bibliography shows, he has based his work on authoritative sources. He has made an impressive contribution towards our understanding of the parables by examining the technical, as well as other aspects of the parables. Although in this paper I have emphasized his treatment of the literary characteristics only he also furnishes a noteworthy commentary. He captures something of the environment out of which the parables of Jesus came.

Cadoux endeavors, with a high degree of success, to find the real meaning behind the parables. He is aware of



the need for background knowledge in interpretation. The categories in which he places the parables reflect thought and research on the subject. Many of his comments are particularly relevant, an example being his discussion of the parables that came out of conflict. Both Dodd and Jeremias make reference to his treatment of this particular aspect of his study. One might say that Cadoux lays the basis for further investigation.

Dodd and Jeremias are very helpful in recapturing the "sitz im leben." Jeremias refers to Dodd's work frequently. Dodd's book preceeded Jeremias' work by about ten years. While Dodd concerns himself mainly with those parables that he believes specifically refer to the kingdom, Jeremias covers the entire field. Dodd, like Cadoux, did much to place the parables in their original setting and sought the meaning that was originally intended. It is Jeremias who offers the most comprehensive treatment in this regard. By examining the changes that the parables have undergone and the uses which men have found for them, he is successful in removing the outer shell surrounding the inherent and intended message of the parables.

Jeremias is able to clear away much of the doubt and confusion that has prevailed in the past.

I have found Klausner very helpful in outlining an authentic account of social, political and economic conditions in Jesus' day. Klausner demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of his subject. He is most helpful in filling in the



the background of Jesus' life.

Other sources such as Abrahams, Boskyns, Cadbury and Bowie are helpful in that, although they have not made a comprehensive study of the parables they throw new light on specific aspects of them. Cadbury might be singled out as one who is a most challenging and thought provoking writer. He presents viewpoints which must be reckoned with by the honest scholar.

Ferris does not deal with the parables specifically, however, he does provide a helpful outline in preaching. It is Buttrick who deals with the parables from the preacher's point of view. Buttrick captures the meaning and significance of the parables and with superb skill draws out the lessons embodied therein as they may be related to life.

By surveying the work that has been carried on in this field one becomes aware that our knowledge and understanding of the parables continually grows through the efforts of men who seek truth. To these men we owe a deep debt of gratitude and an obligation to preserve that which they place in our trust.



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